# Gordon Allport

**Gordon Willard Allport** (November 11, 1897 – October 9, 1967) was an American psychologist. Allport was one of the first psychologists to focus on the study of the personality, and is often referred to as one of the founding figures of personality psychology.[1] He contributed to the formation of values scales and rejected both a psychoanalytic approach to personality, which he thought often was too deeply interpretive, and a behavioral approach, which he thought did not provide deep enough interpretations from their data. Instead of these popular approaches, he developed an eclectic theory based on traits.[1] He emphasized the uniqueness of each individual, and the importance of the present context, as opposed to past history, for understanding the personality.

| Gordon Allport | |
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| **Born** | November 11, 1897<br>Montezuma, Indiana |
| **Died** | October 9, 1967<br>(aged 69)<br>Cambridge, Massachusetts |
| **Nationality** | United States |
| **Alma mater** | Harvard |
| **Scientific career** | |
| **Fields** | Psychology |

Allport had a profound and lasting influence on the field of psychology, even though his work is cited much less often than that of other well-known figures.[2] Part of his influence stemmed from his knack for exploring and broadly conceptualizing important and interesting topics (e.g. rumor, prejudice, religion, traits). Another part of his influence resulted from the deep and lasting impression he made on his students during his long teaching career, many of whom went on to have important careers in psychology. Among his many students were Jerome S. Bruner, Anthony Greenwald, Stanley Milgram, Leo Postman, Thomas Pettigrew, and M. Brewster Smith. His brother Floyd Henry Allport, was professor of social psychology and political psychology at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs (in Syracuse, New York) from 1924 until 1956, and visiting professor at University of California, Berkeley. A *Review of General Psychology* survey, published in 2002, ranked Allport as the 11th most cited psychologist of the 20th century.[3]

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# Biography

Allport was born in Montezuma, Indiana, the youngest of four sons of John Edwards and Nellie Edith (Wise) Allport. When Gordon was six years old, the family had moved many times and finally settling in Ohio; his early education was in the public schools of Cleveland, Ohio. His father was a country doctor with his clinic and hospital in the family home. Because of inadequate hospital facilities at the time, Allport's father actually turned their home into a makeshift hospital, with patients as well as nurses residing there. Gordon Allport and his brothers grew up surrounded by their father's patients, nurses, and medical equipment, and he and his brothers often assisted their father in the clinic.[4] Allport reported that "Tending office, washing bottles, and dealing with patients were important aspects of my early training" (p. 172).[5] During this time, Allport's father was encapsulated in a blurb in Samuel Hopkins Adams' exposé in Collier's Magazine on fraudulent medicinal cures, later reprinted as the book *The Great American Fraud: Articles on the Nostrum Evil and Quackery*. While much of the book focuses on large scale, heavily advertised patent medicines available at the turn of the century, the author states Allport "would never have embodied this article were it not for the efforts of certain physicians of Cleveland." Allport was criticized for diagnosing and treating morphine addicts via mail simply on the basis of letters and no in-person appointments. Upon receiving Adams' letter detailing his concocted affliction, Allport replied back via mail, diagnosing Adams as a morphine addict and sending doses of the "Dr. J. Edward Allport System," designed to cure morphine addicts. Analysis of the medicine revealed its active ingredient to be nothing more than additional morphine, packed with a bottle of pink whiskey "to mix with the morphin[sp] when it gets low." Adams referred to Allport as a "[quack] who pretend[s] to be a physician," is "no less scoundrelly," and "is even more dangerous" than other fraudulent addiction cure peddlers mentioned earlier in the book.[6]

Allport's mother was a former school teacher, who forcefully promoted her values of intellectual development and religion. One of Allport's biographers states, "he grew up not only with the Protestant religion, but also the Protestant work ethic, which dominated his home life." Gordon Allport's father, who was Scottish, shared this outlook, and operated by his own philosophy that "If every person worked as hard as he could and took only the minimum financial return required by his families needs, then there would be just enough wealth to go around."[5][7]

Biographers describe Allport as a shy and studious boy who lived a fairly isolated childhood. As a teenager, Allport developed and ran his own printing business while serving as editor of his high school newspaper. In 1915, he graduated second in his class at Glenville High School at the age of eighteen. He earned a scholarship that allowed him to attend Harvard University, where one of his older brothers, Floyd Henry Allport, was working on his Ph.D. in Psychology.[8]

Moving to Harvard was a difficult transition for Allport because the moral values and climate were so different from those of his home. However he earned his A.B. degree in 1919 in Philosophy and Economics (not psychology). His interest in the convergence of social psychology and personality psychology was evident in his use of his spare time at Harvard in social service: conducting a boy's club in Boston, visiting for the Family Society, serving as a volunteer probation officer, registering homes for war workers, and aiding foreign students.[9]

Next he traveled to Robert College in Istanbul, Turkey, where he taught economics and philosophy for a year, before returning to Harvard to pursue his Ph.D. in psychology on fellowship in 1920 (in addition to German, Allport remained partially fluent in modern Greek throughout his life). His first publication, *Personality Traits: Their Classification and Measurement* in 1921, was co-authored with his older brother, Floyd Henry Allport, who became an important social psychologist. Allport earned his master's degree in 1921, studying under Herbert Langfeld, and then his Ph.D. in 1922, along the way taking a class with Hugo Münsterberg before the latter's death in 1916.[10]

Harvard then awarded Allport a coveted Sheldon Traveling Fellowship--"a second intellectual dawn," as he later described it. He spent the first Sheldon year studying with the new Gestalt School—which fascinated him—in Berlin and Hamburg, Germany; and then the second year at Cambridge University.[9]

Then Allport returned to Harvard as an instructor in psychology from 1924 to 1926. He began teaching his course "Personality: Its Psychological and Social Aspects" in 1924; it was probably the first course in personality psychology ever taught in the U.S. During this time, Allport married Ada Lufkin Gould, who was a clinical psychologist, and they had one child, a boy, who later became a pediatrician.[9] After going to teach introductory courses on social psychology and personality at Dartmouth College for four years, Allport returned to Harvard and remained there for the rest of his career.

Gordon W. Allport was a longtime and influential member of the faculty at Harvard University from 1930 to 1967. In 1931, he served on the faculty committee that established Harvard's Sociology Department. In the late 1940s, he fashioned an introductory course for the new Social Relations Department into a rigorous and popular undergraduate class. At that time, he was also editor of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. Allport was also a Director of the Commission for the United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1933.[11]

Allport was elected President of the American Psychological Association in 1939. In 1943, he was elected President of the Eastern Psychological Association. In 1944, he served as President of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. In 1950, Allport published his third book titled *The Individual and His Religion*. His fourth book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, was published in 1954, and benefited from his insights from working with refugees during World War II. His fifth book, published in 1955, was titled *Becoming: Basic Considerations for Psychology of Personality*. This book became one of his most widely known publications. In 1963, Allport was awarded the Gold Medal Award from the American Psychological Foundation. In the following year, he received the APA's Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award. Gordon Allport died on October 9, 1967, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, of lung cancer. He was one month shy of being seventy years old.[12]

# Visit with Freud

Allport told the story in his autobiographical essay in *Pattern and Growth in Personality*[13] of his visit as a young, recent college graduate to the already famous Dr. Sigmund Freud in Vienna. To break the ice upon meeting Freud, Allport recounted how he had met a boy on the train on the way to Vienna who was afraid of getting dirty. He refused to sit down near anyone dirty, despite his mother's reassurances. Allport suggested that perhaps the boy had learned this dirt phobia from his mother, a very neat and apparently rather domineering type. After studying Allport for a minute, Freud asked, "And was that little boy you?"

Allport experienced Freud's attempt to reduce this small bit of observed interaction to some unconscious episode from his own remote childhood as dismissive of his current motivations, intentions, and experience. It served as a reminder that psychoanalysis tends to dig too deeply into both the past and the unconscious, overlooking in the process the reputedly more important conscious and immediate aspects of experience. Allport rejected the Freudian views of the unconscious as well as the reductionist theories that attribute human behavior to innate instincts, childhood conditioning, or repressed complexes.[14] While Allport never denied that unconscious and historical variables have a role to play in human psychology (particularly in the immature and disordered) his own work would always emphasize conscious motivations and current context.

## Allport's trait theory

Allport is known as a "trait" psychologist. He did not believe that people can be classified according to a small number of trait dimensions, maintaining that each person is unique and distinguished by peculiar traits.[15]

One of his early projects was to go through the dictionary and locate every term that he thought could describe a person. From this, he developed a list of 4500 trait like words. He organized these into three levels of traits. This is similar to Goldberg's fundamental lexical hypothesis, or the hypothesis that over time, humans develop widely used, generic terms for individual differences in their daily interactions.

Allport's three trait levels are:

1. **Cardinal trait** - This is the trait that dominates and shapes a person's behavior. These are the ruling passions/obsessions, such as a need for money, fame etc.

2. **Central trait** - This is a general characteristic found in some degree in every person. These are the basic building blocks that shape most of our behavior although they are not as overwhelming as cardinal traits. An example of a central trait would be honesty.

3. **Secondary trait** - These are characteristics seen only in certain circumstances (such as particular likes or dislikes that a very close friend may know). They must be included to provide a complete picture of human complexity.

## Genotypes and phenotypes

Allport hypothesized the idea of internal and external forces that influence an individual's behavior. He called these forces Genotypes and Phenotypes. **Genotypes** are internal forces that relate to how a person retains information and uses it to interact with the external world. **Phenotypes** are external forces, these relate to the way an individual accepts his surroundings and how others influence their behavior. These forces generate the ways in which we behave and are the groundwork for the creation of individual traits.

The Problem with this hypothesis is that it cannot be proven as they are internal theories, influenced presumably by the outer environment.

## Functional autonomy of motives

Allport was one of the first researchers to draw a distinction between Motive and Drive. He suggested that a drive forms as a reaction to a motive, which may outgrow the motive as the reason for a behavior. The drive then becomes autonomous and distinct from the motive, whether the motive was instinct or something else. The idea that drives can become independent of the original motives for a given behavior is known as "functional autonomy."

Allport gives the example of a man who seeks to perfect his task or craft. His original motive may be a sense of inferiority engrained in his childhood, but his diligence in his work and the motive it acquires later on is a need to excel in his chosen profession, which becomes the man's drive. Allport says that the theory:

> ... avoids the absurdity of regarding the energy of life now, in the present, as somehow consisting of early archaic forms (instincts, prepotent reflexes, or the never-changing Id). Learning brings new systems of interests into existence just as it does new abilities and skills. At each stage of development these interests are always contemporary; whatever drives, drives now.[16]

Another example of functional autonomy is when the original motive of making money to buy goods becomes a drive, in which making money becomes an end in itself. Functional autonomy is thought to underlie obsessions and compulsions.

## *The Psychologist's Frame of Reference*

Allport gave a presidential address at the 47th annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Berkeley, California, on September 7, 1939 on *The Psychologist's Frame of Reference*, a piece of literature he and his colleagues collaborated on addressing the changing culture of psychological writing from as early as 1888 to 1938 in America.

He began his address by simply asking, "First, what it is that competent psychologists in America have been making of our science in the past fifty years?" Between thirty of his colleagues, they divided fifty journals according to how significant and devoted they were to the advancement of psychology as a science (Allport, pg.1). More than sixteen hundred articles in total were analyzed.

Allport first points to the decline in "facultative" treatment of mental functions. He explains that from 1888 to 1898, 19% of the psychological writing leaned upon instinctive, "synthetic apperceptive unity, and kindred concepts" (pg.2). As the pre-existing model for treatment drop off in the years to follow, modern facultative treatment risen and with it, different terminology, but "kindred in spirit".

Allport later points out that studies related to the higher mental processes, such as language behavior that involved learning, reasoning, and concept-formation began declining, but experimental studies, however, were slowly on the rise. Using rats and doing maze learning in animals and studies using men who were rendered speechless steadily increased from 1918 on.

Other findings point out that the literature examined that related to applied psychology and social betterment was steadily declining as well. Allport suggests that psychologists were turning to specialized journals not included in his survey and that some welcomed the change while others did not.

In conclusion, Allport's address welcomed the change, claiming that psychology should avoid authoritarianism in the field, from becoming a cult that ruled out novel and unexplained phenomenon by "one-sided tests of method."

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## See also

- Allport's scale - a measure of the manifestation of prejudice in a society devised by Gordon Allport in 1954.
- List of science and religion scholars
- Contact hypothesis
- Labels of Primary Potency

## Notes


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## Further reading

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# External links

- Allports classic paper on autonomy of motives (http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Allport/autonomy.htm) at Classics in the History of Psychology page.
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